Minds On Fire

When I opened the secondary school, many of the students came from a Steiner school which had recently closed down. It soon became apparent that the students were not used to speaking aloud in class. They were also not used to forming groups and having discussions. They were most comfortable sitting and taking notes from the board. They seemed timid and full of self-consciousness, they were not open to exploring ideas, not to mention putting those ideas forward. They had no voice.

I wanted the students to start thinking for themselves, I wanted them to find their voice. It didn't have to be a big, bold and booming voice, not everyone needs to appear super-confident and ready to take on the world, but a voice should exist. There was no spark in their eyes, the lights were out.

I was really concerned about this, many psychological studies have proved that openness is a major player in the skill set needed for learning and for life.

I decided to try project based learning. It had worked really well in the primary school, but these students were fourteen to sixteen, so I was unsure of how they would respond.

I designed a project which saw the students working in pairs and was set around building a model eco-house, reminiscent of the eco-village from the primary school project. This pushed them out of their comfort zone as they worked with partners and met a deadline to present their eco-house in a public exhibition.

The project definitely improved the energy and engagement. If there was a fairground sledge-hammer game which tested enthusiasm instead of strength, the L.A. primary school kids were swinging the hammer with full force enthusiasm, ringing in a ten. The teenagers were now hovering around a four, but it was an improvement from zero. I know teenagers like to be cool, cynical and feign a lack of interest in everything, but I believe we should push against this, I was determined to keep going with the projects, to see if we could increase the enthusiasm level.

For the next project I begin to wonder if it was possible to inject some of the energy I had witnessed at the primary school. Could I at least have them swing in a score of six or seven?

The answer arrived unexpectedly, and came from the students.

One day, as I was passing the break room, I overheard the students talking about the Scottish Referendum. A vote had taken place within Scotland, to determine if people wanted to break away from the rest of the U.K. Some of the discussions which took place in school had been a bit heated due to strongly opposing views. I listened to the usually silent students articulating the finer points of political analysis. That passion would be nice to capture during lessons, I thought with a pang of disappointment. I kept thinking about the student's animated discussion over the next few days. I decided that I wanted to pull all of that energy into a project - a project about the referendum.

When I presented the idea, the students were unsure, to say the least, and pushed back. I said it was something I really wanted to try, if they hated it, we'd never have to do another project again.

After finally agreeing to participate, the students were separated into two groups, one group became characters from the 'Yes' campaign, and the other group became characters from the 'Better Together' campaign. Most of the student's original allegiance was already known by all, so they were placed into the opposite campaign and had to see the issues from a different perspective. The objective was for each group to deliver an end-of-project presentation to try to persuade a panel (of teachers and parents) to vote for or against a referendum.

To help them with this task, running parallel to the project, was a course in the 'Five Canons of Rhetoric,' which included:

- Invention (developing your argument).
- Style (how to present your argument).
- Arrangement (organising your argument for maximum effect).
- Delivery (body language and use of voice).
- Memory (knowing your content, so you can speak from the heart).

Armed with their newly acquired rhetorical skills, subject knowledge and desire to gain a competitive edge, the two campaigns battled it out with passion and commitment, which had to be seen to be believed. The previously cool and cynical teenagers were showing engagement and excitement – ringing in a definite eight on the enthusiasm scale. Parents were telling me that they were discussing the project at home and talking to family members to deepen their understanding of the issues.

This was a learning environment which took everyone by surprise, including the students. Teachers were saying they'd never seen students so engaged, parents were telling me they'd never seen their children so eager to get to school.

What was going on with these teenagers and could we reproduce it?

It turns out that yes, it could be reproduced. I would come to realise that subversive drama projects are the key to student enthusiasm and engagement, ringing in a clanging 10 on the enthusiasm scale.

I started researching about using games in the classroom and this was when I fortuitously came across the work of Professor Carnes and his book *Minds On Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College.* The book is based on a college programme called 'React To The Past,' (RTTP).

Reading his book validated what we were seeing in our school. It explained why this frenzy of learning had occurred during the Scottish Referendum project including: High levels of engagement, critically thinking about real-world issues, forming strong bonds of community, eliciting empathetic responses, developing leadership skills and producing conscientious researchers and skilled readers. The book gave me the belief that we were on the right track and we could do it again.

In the introduction of the book Professor Carnes writes about posing a question to a student: "Why do 'Reacting' classes generate, almost spontaneously, such high levels of engagement?" He tells us: "The answer seemed obvious. Reacting classes are configured as games. Games are play. People enjoy playing."

Students definitely enjoy playing games, as the popularity in online games and in digital education has shown. I have seen how children will engage with an online program to work through math problems and how it will hold their interest for a whole lesson, whereby they will hunch over a maths textbook with a level of energy more suited to sleep. However, most of this type of online learning is done alone and lacks the interaction which is necessary for social development.

There is a different type of engaged play, which is often undertaken naturally during the play of young children - sizing up a situation and figuring out what is relevant; recognizing your options, deciding why a strategy would work or fail, assessing your emotions, all the time developing practical wisdom and reflecting on choices, applying creativity and imagination.

Professor Carnes writes:

> Our predominant pedagogical system – rational, hierarchical, individualistic, and well-ordered – often ignores aspects of the self relation to emotion, mischievous subversion, social engagement and creative disorder. Role-immersion games, when configured as an intellectualized pedagogical system, provides access to these often untapped wellsprings of motivation and imagination.

Carnes includes information about how many U.S. students are not satisfied within their educational experience and cites a UCLA survey, which found that on average 40% of students are disengaged or alienated. This has the consequence of not attaining qualifications, a dismal statistic is that a third of U.S. students fail to earn a degree.

The U.K. percentage of students leaving higher education is not quite as dismal as the U.S., however the numbers are increasing.

A Guardian article from March 2018 reported:

> Drop-out rates among university students who give up their studies within 12 months have gone up for the third year in a row, according to official statistics.
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> Figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that 26,000 students in England who began studying for their first degree in 2015 did not make it beyond the first year.
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> Rates of non-continuation were especially bad at London Metropolitan University, where 19.5% of young full-time undergraduates did not continue their studies into the second year.
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> Bolton University also had a high drop-out rate at 17%, losing 130 of 755 full-time entrants. At Middlesex University the rate was 16.4%, while it was 14.3% at the University of Bedfordshire and 13.5% at the University of Suffolk
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> Of all students in the UK starting full-time degree courses for the first time in 2015-16, more than one in 10 (10.5%) are expected to leave higher education without a qualification.

Why are they disengaged? What would they prefer to spend their time doing?

Professor Carnes argues that higher education has always been at the mercy of 'bad play' or 'subversive play', as he has termed the behaviour.

Secondary and even primary education is now compromised by the draw of video games, social networking and Youtube. They bring all the drama and excitement which is totally absent from classrooms. Many of those 'games' which enthrall young people are full of competition. What is it the lure of competitive play?

Competitive Play

In writing about competition and play, Professor Carnes mentions a Dutch historian by the name of Johan Huizinga, who, in 1944, wrote *Homo Ludens – A Study Of the Play Element In Culture.*

I was curious about what Huizinga had to say, so I read his book and found it really interesting. 'Ludere' is the Latin word for 'play,' 'to mimic', 'to mock', 'to deceive.' 'Homo Ludens' is simply 'people who play.'

Huizinga tells us that "we are accustomed to think of play and seriousness as an absolute antithesis." However in thinking about competitive play, he puts forward that the Greek word 'agon' refers to a contest or a struggle. A contest can take any form, chariot racing, athletics or debating. But the play element is the '*agon*izing', striving and suffering for the valuable prize which is at stake.

Why the striving and suffering if it's supposed to be play? Huizinga argues that within play the 'antagonist instinct' is man's need to fight. And competitive play whether it be serious, fateful, bloody, scared or fatal, "raises the individual or the collective personality to a higher power."

Huizinga points to man's basic need to be praised and honored and validated, to be recognized for doing things well. But to be recognized means to set yourself apart, to do things better than someone else would do them, to strive for excellence, this is where the need for competition arises. He believed the culture of civilizations, war, politics, science, commerce was based on competitive play.

However, Professor Carnes feels Huizinga's theory leaves a few holes in understanding subversive play and says:

> If civilizations had been built by competitive play, then its motivational force could hardly have been subversive in character. Competition thrills…because it contains the possibility of subverting existing social hierarchies and cultural assumption"…Straddling the boundaries of real and unreal – is a source of the peculiar emotional power of subversive play.

The boundary of real/unreal and order/chaos is the obstacle-strewn path which sees the students watch their step, constantly question their direction, and do a double-take on their own certainties and assumptions of what is right and wrong. This can be challenging as 'being certain' is interwoven into the fabric of our neurology.

Professor of Neuroscience, Beau Lotto, says the primal need to be certain, to predict outcomes, was historically necessary for our safety and survival. This has lead to our deep dislike of uncertainty, our inability to cope with unpredictable situations, which often causes us to feel unstable and can affect the quality of our mental health. Lotto says:

> Every behaviour we do, we do to reduce uncertainty. The stress resulting from uncertainty is tremendous in our society. It increases brain cell death it decreases plasticity…we do almost everything to avoid uncertainty. Yet the irony is, that that's the only place we can go if we're ever going to see differently. And that's why creativity, seeing differently, always begins in the same way, it begins with a question.

Lotto says that everything we do is grounded in assumptions from previous experience. And how nothing interesting happens from this place. Is there a way to safely move beyond our assumptions? Lotto tells us there is:

> Fortunately evolution gave us a solution, it's a way of being, it's actually a way of being that celebrates uncertainty, it's open to possibility, it's inherently collaborative…it is play.

According to the *Journal of Play,* the elements of play are: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength and poise. Another component of play is the making fun of each other and yourself over mistakes, the banter and humour which is brought about by spontaneous interactions.